

THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE
FORUM

Martha Brill Olcott

THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL ASIA

October 1992 //Volume 6, Number 2



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Columbia University Libraries

https://archive.org/details/harrimaninstitut06unse_0

THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FORUM

Volume 6, Number 2

October 1992

THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL ASIA

Martha Brill Olcott

How Unique is Central Asia?

The forces at work in the transformation of Central Asia are much the same as those at work elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, although they take on specific coloration from local social and cultural patterns. The collapse of the USSR was conditioned by the struggle for the enormous resources and potential wealth of the territory. The issues which that fight raised, but did not solve—control of natural resources, control of existing industrial capacity, and control of the right to negotiate hard-currency deals with foreign concerns—are now being reproduced on smaller scales, between the republics and within them.

The old center-periphery dispute between Moscow and republic centers still remains as well, although it has been dramatically transformed by the death of the USSR. Even today, Russia has not fully ceded control of republic resources to the republics themselves. As the successor state to the USSR, Russia demands exorbitant transit fees or part ownership of new mineral extraction ventures in repayment for Moscow's earlier investments.

This economic struggle is exaggerated by a battle for political power, made possible by the political vacuum which has yawned after the breakup, but even more so since the dissolution of the Communist Party. The successor parties have not inherited the old Party's ability to command loyalty or respect, and no new institutions have emerged that are capable of mobilizing mass support. Even the

1991 presidential elections conferred only minimal legitimacy.

This has allowed alternative or local elites to begin to move to fill this vacuum, sometimes on the grounds that the existing leadership is discredited by its ties to the past, and sometimes because the destruction of the old political structures has made it possible to appeal directly to the masses.

What especially drives the engine of political change, though, is the deteriorating economy. A year after dissolution people everywhere are far worse off than they were, and the chances of improvement seem remote to a populace that has no faith in the recuperative powers of an economy based on a market mechanism whose principles of operation they do not understand.

Central Asia's Reluctant Liberation

One of the ways in which Central Asia really is unique is the lack of public agitation for independence prior to the dissolution of the USSR. The Central Asian masses did not campaign for independence, not because they were against it but because they simply did not believe independence an option. Now that it has come, independence enjoys considerable public support, both because of the opportunity independence offers for reclaiming lost cultural and historical values, and because it lets people "get back" at the Russians for the colonialism of Russian and Soviet rule. Independence



has not lowered people's economic needs, but it has lowered the ability of their leaders to respond to them.

One of the tensions within Central Asian society comes from the fact that the existing elite itself was acutely aware of the region's economic fragility and well understood the economic cost that would be paid for independence. Thus the elites not only were not working for independence, they actively tried to slow or prevent it, forcefully arguing instead for the right of republic autonomy within a Soviet context.

Formal political opposition in the region was limited prior to independence, and those fledgling alternative political groupings which did exist claimed republic sovereignty and a more equitable division of economic resources as their primary goals. Only Muhammad Salih, the poet who headed the Erk (Freedom) movement in Uzbekistan, argued for republic independence as the primary goal of his organization.

Now, however, all of the region's leaders seek to wrap themselves in the protective flag of republic nationalism. Nonetheless, even the most popular of the Central Asian leaders, Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan and Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, find their appeals to patriotism of limited practical political benefit. All of Central Asia's leaders are undermined by their economic responsibilities, for they no longer enjoy the protection and the favors they once could beg of Moscow, and they are unprepared to regulate the economic redistribution which that collapse now requires.

Mapping Central Asia's Future

Though Central Asian society was not prepared for the breakup of the USSR, it is not clear that the political events of 1991 were contrary to the existing patterns of political development. Immediately prior to the collapse of the USSR, I argued in a variety of public forums that there were four possible variations on the Central Asian future, or four ideal types of solutions:

1. The old elite would be preserved, within the USSR.
2. A new elite would assume control of Central Asia. The basis of power for the new elite might be Pan-Turkism, or it might be nationalist, but the region would remain in the USSR.

3. The old elite would remain in power, but their states would not be part of the USSR.
4. Islamic governments would control these states, which would exist outside of the USSR.

A year into nominal independence, this list of possibilities must of course be revised, but not as radically as it may first appear; in many ways the possible futures of Central Asia remain much as they were.

The states of Central Asia had formal independence forced upon them after the Slavic states' unilateral dissolution of the USSR on December 8, 1991. All have gone through the motions of defining separate statehood, occupying seats on international bodies such as the United Nations, adopting new state flags and other symbols, and beginning to create individual bodies of law.

However, unlike other former Soviet republics, and unlike most other colonies-become-states, the states of Central Asia had no developed popular independence movements, and created no national heroes in the process of independence. Though now internationally recognized as independent, these states are still at the stage of internal institution building which more commonly occurs during the immediate pre-independence period of decolonization—when states are only moving toward independence.

Thus there still remains an enormity of obstacles between the Central Asians and the goal of true independence—meaning, to have a state which controls its economic and financial resources and can secure its own borders. The problems facing Central Asia and the rest of the former Soviet Union are so large, and the abilities of its citizens and leaders to deal with them so limited, that the independence of these states, while a fact, is neither guaranteed for the future, nor even defined right now.

A survey of the various actors involved in defining the nationhood of these new states will demonstrate that the four futures, revised, would be:

1. The old elites will remain in control of separate states, which are under effective Russian control.
2. New elites will emerge to run the region, either as separate states or as part of some sort of Pan-Turkic-Slavic union, which leaves the region effectively under Russian hegemony.

3. The old elite succeeds in making the transition to real independence and begins to transfer power to a new generation.
4. A new, "anti-establishment" elite comes to power, completely transfiguring the states, not only making them independent but perhaps even reconfiguring them in a way which will inevitably be called "Islamic fundamentalist."

The Unknown Masses

One of the greatest difficulties in thinking about the political future of Central Asia is that the largest and most influential group in the transformation of the region is the one about which we know the least, the Central Asian masses. The Soviet Union never had any shortage of pundits quick to talk about "masses" of whom they were largely ignorant, but in the case of the Central Asian masses that ignorance is doubled, for most of the pundits, even if they are of the same nationality as the masses for whom they presume to speak, tend to be Russianized, if not wholly Russified. What in fact the huge mass of the native Central Asian populations thinks is largely a mystery, even in some ways to themselves.

Kept very remote from all but folk versions of their own histories and cultures by Soviet policies, the Central Asian masses have only begun to articulate their own self-identities. Most of these people understand themselves to belong to new nations, and all know themselves to be part of ancient peoples. However, most of these peoples never saw the necessity of achieving nationhood as part of the imperative of their nationality. Issues of preserving themselves as a nationality were and will be vitally important, but that passion was rarely channeled toward a need for nationhood.

One reason for that is that there are other identity providers which are at least as important as nationality. Prior to the fall of Soviet rule in Central Asia, much of the Western literature focused on the role of Islam and the future of pan-national ties in the region. As the fighting all autumn 1992 in Tajikistan has vividly demonstrated, there is also an entire nexus of ties and obligation by clan and by region. These frequently overlap and can be a far more powerful basis for social mobilization than nationality as yet is.

Most often these ties spring from earlier historical epochs, when politics and trade divided Central Asian territory differently than is the case today. Allegiances may exist today which are based on ties

originating in, for example, the Kokand khanate (which stretched over parts of what is now southern Kazakhstan, Osh oblast in Kyrgyzstan and the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan), or the Emirate of Bukhara (which included Samarkand and all of what is now southeastern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) or the Khanate of Khiva (which stretched over the current territory of western Uzbekistan and eastern Turkmenistan). These ties spring from patterns of commerce and physical exchange reinforced by kinship which have been sustained through to the present and which bear no resemblance to the current political divisions of the region.

The Russians of Central Asia live in as layered a society as the Central Asians do. The most obvious group to distinguish is the Cossacks, descendants of Tsarist frontier troops first sent into the area 400 years ago, who claim large territory in six separate regions of northeast, northwest, central and southeast and southwest Kazakhstan. Suppressed by the Soviets in the 1920s, the Cossacks retained their military formation in secret and carefully preserved records of the lands turned over to their communal usage by a series of Russian Tsars.

No less important are the perceived distinctions of the non-Cossack Russians. The descendants of Stolypin-era "homesteaders," found throughout Kazakhstan and in central Kyrgyzstan, view Central Asia as Russia's frontier. Though none have assimilated, these Russians know the local history, respect the local culture, and occasionally even speak the local language. The descendants of exiled kulaks and World War II evacuees, found throughout Central Asia, also have few remaining ties to mainland Russia, and often are on good terms with the Central Asians. Most of Central Asia's Jewish residents come from this wave of Russian migrants, although there are Bukharan (Sephardic) Jews who have lived in the region since the time of the Arab conquest.

In sharp distinction are the attitudes of the post-war Khrushchev-era Virgin Land "enthusiasts" and Brezhnev-era "industrial refugees" also dispersed throughout the region, economic "marginals" from Russia who came to Central Asia in search of economic opportunity. They view themselves as Soviet citizens and frequently as Russian patriots, who are now stranded in a foreign country dominated by an alien culture. There are unifying forces in each community. The Russians are unified by their language, and their attachment—frequently already diluted to near nonexistence—to Mother Russia. No matter how attenuated their

love for Mother Russia, though, none see any reason why they should suffer a diminution of their political rights in order for the Central Asians to gain new political opportunities.

An equally strong and indisputable unifying element for the Central Asian masses is their Islamic identity. Distinctions may be made in degree of observance and in sophistication of practice, but the Central Asian masses universally understand themselves to be Muslims and all participate in the basic life-cycle Islamic rituals.

Although they have yet to fully accept this themselves, the Central Asians also share a common history—the conquest by Alexander the Great, the Arab penetration, the Sammanid-Persian ascendancy, the rise of the Seljuks, the Mongol Conquest, the rise of Turkic tribal dynasties, the Russian Conquest, and Soviet rule. While each locality had its unique history, the common elements of the experience are numerous, with the major variations being those between nomads and sedents.

The Elites: An Overview

In the end it will be the masses who make the choices, but it will be the elites who define what they are choosing among, and we know considerably more about these elites than we do about the masses. There are five different elite groups in Central Asia: the former Communist Party nomenklatura; the intellectuals and arts establishment; functionaries of the military-industrial complex; participants in the “shadow economy”; and the religious establishment.

Although the groups are distinct, they can and do overlap, frequently between themselves within single republics, and sometimes from republic to republic; nor are the subgroups monolithic, for distinctions must be made for age, nationality, and function.

Among the nomenklatura, for example, the older generation was tied firmly to Moscow and to the republic capitals, while the younger generation tried to create their power bases locally. Intellectuals range from those fully and completely tied to the old establishment, through those who were nomenklatura “sanctioned nationalists,” to some who were truly independent of the other elites.

The military-industrial complex, which is prominently represented in the economies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is predominantly Russian. Some of its members, however, are “local” (far more fre-

quently local-born Russian than local nationals), while others have no ties at all to the region where their factories or troops happen to be located.

The shadow economy was the most nationality-blind and region-independent of all the elites, with ties and contacts all across the USSR, all across Central Asia, and throughout each republic.

The religious elite has three variants: those people who served the Central Asian Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (SADUM)—the local branch of the all-USSR governing body for official Islam that was created by Stalin; those who worked as clerics in local communities, generally without official approval; and Islamic “fundamentalists” or revivalists.

The Party Elite

After independence the relations between these elites, and between the elites and the masses, have sharply changed. The old-generation Party elites no longer have strong ties with their counterparts in other republics, because of the collapse of the Communist Party. Successor “socialist” parties were formed in each of the republics, but none of them are forming strong local branches. Instead the presidents of the republics have erected a “hakimet” or presidential representative system upon the ruins of the old oblast Party structure. “Hakims” are presidential appointments and supervise a “hakimet” committee.

Republic leaders maintain strong bilateral ties to their counterparts in other republics through new interstate treaties, and ties to Russia remain especially strong. Strong ties to Russia are also maintained through the heavy industries still present in the respective republics, now of unclear ownership, but under the control of local Russians who are in close contact with former all-union, now Russian, ministerial and industrial associations, or through the military directly. The Party elite also maintains ties to Russia through the unraveling financial structure, as well as multilateral ties through the CIS structures.

The ex-Party elite also has strong and growing ties to the shadow economy, both at the all-union and republic levels, although at the republic level the degree of contact depends upon the background of the republic leader. In Uzbekistan, for example, ties between Party elite and members of the Tashkent shadow economy tend to be weak because of a personal feud between President Islam

Karimov (whose roots are in Samarkand) and former Vice President Shahrullah Mirsaidov (a former mayor of Tashkent). Karimov, though, is rumored to maintain close ties with the shadow sector of the military-industrial complex, and Tajikistan's now former President Rahmon Nabiev survived in office throughout summer 1992 in large part because of his strong connections with the military-industrial plant in Khojent, protected by the Russian Army.

The younger generation Party elites are in a more precarious position; like their seniors they no longer have interpublic ties, and their ties to the masses are weak. However, they lack the lucrative Moscow ties of their elders, leaving them with no alternative but to attempt to forge new political, economic, and structural linkages, especially through the shadow sector or the military-industrial complex. This younger generation is a key constituency pushing for economic reform. They are most prominent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in both the agricultural and industrial sectors. They are also present in Uzbekistan, among members of the new "foreign trade" elite.

In Uzbekistan, both the young and old generation of partocrats have constructed strong ties to SADUM, with whom they share an interest in controlling a popular "Islamic threat," which may not exist, but which gives them an opportunity to exert control. Neither generation has much contact with the masses beyond that, except to the degree that they are integrated into their local traditional power structures.

This is the complex of clan and regional ties which always underlay Party and government connections in Central Asia, and to a considerable extent still does. Nowhere are the patterns easy to document, but family ties dictate patronage patterns in rural Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The patterns of violence in Tajikistan have clearly demonstrated the overlap of regional, family and government ties from the local levels of government up through the national level. During the Soviet period Central Asia's leaders hid their family and clan ties. Now Kirghiz and Kazakh leaders in particular make open reference to them, and are pleased to accept the additional political loyalty that this confers.

The military-industrial elite shares the ex-Party elite's interest in controlling a perceived "Islamic threat," but otherwise sees its ties more with Moscow and all-union concerns than it does strictly locally. Overlap with the Party elite occurs at the top, and in Uzbekistan, at least, this elite overlaps

as well with the all-union elite of the shadow economy. However, the military-industrial sector has very little contact with the masses.

Although still fully in control of their societies everywhere but in Tajikistan, the Party elite is in search of ways to legitimate their hold on power. In each republic the leadership has taken a different tack.

For the most part Central Asia's leaders are defining themselves in "negative" terms, as what they are not. Karimov is *not* an Islamic fundamentalist; Akaev is *not* a partocrat. The leaders are having a much harder time defining what it is that they are. Akaev is the hero of a "silk revolution," Nazarbaev bridges Europe with Asia as a leader of world stature, and Niazov creates a host of new orders and decorations to honor his accomplishment of simply being President of Turkmenistan. However, none of these images are easily translatable into a transferable base of political support.

The Intellectuals

Each leader looks to his intellectuals to help him construct a stable popular base. These men are all products of a system which specialized in social engineering, and though each has renounced his Soviet and communist past, each still believes in the effectiveness of political image building. Now the goal is to create "democratically-rooted" nationalist ideologies, and it is hoped that the national intellectuals can play a constructive role in the process.

In most republics, however, the ties between members of the intellectual elite are no better than among the partocrats. Those intellectuals that were purely the creatures of the "internationalist" Party-based establishment are compromised before their peers, but many still hold positions of prominence in educational if not artistic hierarchies. To know who these are all one needs to do is compare the table of contents of local Academy of Science historical and social science journals from today and from ten years ago. Some even enjoy second lives as nationalists, but though they have managed to hold onto their government sinecures their younger colleagues are disdainful of them in private and sometimes even in public.

Another group of intellectuals, those who once seemed a nationalist "loyal opposition," articulating national concerns in the Soviet period, now falls into the classic dilemma of post-colonial intellectuals. Educated by Russians, in many instances not

able even to read or speak their "native" languages, let alone create in them, these people share many of the views and conceptions of those who trained them; their teachers, however, view them as natives, not Russians.

In fact, most of these are in neither camp. Their ties to their own national masses are weak, and the issues which rally the intellectuals are not those which move the masses. The intellectuals, for example, may stress the necessity of studying and following the "Turkish model," in the hopes of creating a Europeanized, market-driven society in which religion does not predominate.

The masses, however, see much more significance in the creation of language laws that make use of the native language obligatory, and furthermore are not swayed by the intellectuals' arguments that their languages should be written in Turkish, Latin-based script, rather than in Arabic script. These former national loyal oppositionists are particularly active in the new governmental bodies, the parliaments, and the press, which they hope will create new identities for citizens of the Central Asian republics, and so new linkages between themselves and their non-elite countrymen.

Some intellectuals have become figures of real political prominence. They include Kazakhstan's Olzhas Suleimenov, former USSR deputy and leader of the Anti-Nuclear Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, who now heads a government-organized "mass" political party in Kazakhstan (the People's Congress), but who lacks direct political influence in Kazakhstan's current political scene. They also include Davlat Khudonazarov, the former head of the USSR Union of Cinematographers who ran as the opposition candidate in Tajikistan's 1991 presidential elections. Muhammad Salih, who ran against Karimov for president in 1991, is an Uzbek-language poet who has gone from being an establishment to an opposition figure.

As might be predicted for a group which has so much in common with Russians intellectually, the members of this elite have very few ties to the religious establishment, and view non-establishment religious activity as very much the same sort of "fundamentalist threat" as do Russians.

Anti-establishment intellectuals, of the sort who tend to create and lead the opposition parties and groups of Central Asia, have a much better understanding of and contact with the masses through a variety of channels. They also have the capacity to form ties with the locally-based shadow economy. In Tajikistan the opposition was able to merge with

the local power structures, a possibility which exists in Uzbekistan as well. Though the Republic opposition party in Kazakhstan has been less successful with this strategy, they have staged successful local actions in western Kazakhstan, bringing down the local government in Novy Uzen in July 1992.

In Tajikistan the anti-establishment intellectual elite was able to enter into a long-term political alliance with the Islamic Renaissance Party. Ties between Birlik (Unity), Uzbekistan's major opposition group, and local religious elites are more informal but certainly seem to be pervasive. Their relationship to the locally banned Islamic Renaissance Party is harder to ascertain. Many anti-establishment elite groups in Central Asia also have ties to their Russian democratic counterparts, and sometimes even have been funded by them.

What the anti-establishment intellectuals who are at present creating the opposition parties of Central Asia all lack, however, is experience in governing, or even participating in a political process. Only in Kyrgyzstan do anti-establishment intellectuals serve in parliament—and even there only five of the deputies were elected from what in 1990 were still termed "opposition" parties. Despite their small numbers, these five do participate actively in the work of the legislature.

The inability to participate in the Soviet government or the successor bodies (which were chosen before the fall of the USSR in elections that could be called "democratic" only by comparison with traditional Soviet elections) has left the members of this elite singularly ignorant about the processes of government, law-formation, or indeed even political opposition. This is an ignorance of which republic leaders have been happy to take advantage, but it does little to promise future political stability.

The "Shadow" Economy Elite

The elite of the shadow economy is an "alternative" elite as well. However, unlike the anti-establishment elite, most of this group emerges from the local traditional leadership and represents a conservative, traditional view. They are directly tied to the masses, and indeed, to the other elites as well. In the Soviet period they essentially subsumed the kolkhoz structure, and so are in firm control of agriculture, particularly in the most productive areas. The subject which is of most direct concern to this group is land; they support continued public ownership

of agricultural land, with rights for themselves to rent or lease the best.

The Religious Elite

The role of SADUM has changed since the collapse of central authority. On the one hand, SADUM no longer has a monopoly on the religious life of the Central Asians; indeed, its scope and authority were formally reduced by the development of a separate Kazakhstan Religious Board. The community itself now plays a greater role in regulating (and funding) its own religious life. However, the role of religion in society has itself expanded, and as a result the formal religious establishments have acquired a host of new responsibilities that they previously did not have. SADUM distributes pilgrimage trips to Mecca and funds from foreign governments for religious education and mosque construction.

In Tajikistan, the opposition government includes clerics or clerical influence in the management of all spheres of the republic's social life. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan there is formal, but limited, clerical involvement in the government. Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are more determinedly secular in their government philosophy, but the draft constitution offered by the Akaev government recognizes the unique role played by Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Local clerics now derive real power from their communities. This is true throughout Central Asia, but more so in the countryside than in the cities. The religious authority of most of the formerly "unofficial" mullahs is now formally recognized by SADUM, and many of these men are conservative traditionalists in their thinking. Though they often lack the formal religious education which the "fundamentalists" enjoy, the sort of society they are promoting is no more modern. This is particularly true in Uzbekistan. Throughout Central Asia local religious elites are emerging as leading figures in local political life, and are likely to wield increasing influence in communal affairs.

Distinct from them, but often working parallel, are the medresseh-trained "fundamentalists," who are opening religious schools and trying to increase public observance of Islamic tenets. They often deal easily and make common purpose with SADUM-recognized officials. In rural areas local political authorities tolerate their activities as well.

The group in closest contact with the populace, however, is the local clerics who are actively involved in trying to bring Islam into village schools. This group is influenced by the fundamentalists, with whom they share the goal of returning their people to Islam. The local influence of both the fundamentalists and the village clerics is growing as they develop economic bases, building mosques and other structures through contributions and businesses.

There has been a lot of speculation in the Western press about the role of foreign Islamic actors in Central Asia's religious revival. There are two groups of Muslim missionaries functioning in Central Asia, one working with the fundamentalists and financed by fundamentalist organizations from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and opposition groups from Egypt and Syria, themselves funded through the United Arab Emirates. The other, sent by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and so with vastly greater resources, is working through SADUM.

With the exception of Tajikistan, the influence of Iran is not great, and even in Tajikistan religious activists take their spiritual orientation from Sunni (and not Iranian Shiite) sources. Since the fall of Najibullah, emissaries from Afghanistan have been exerting some influence as well, especially in Tajikistan. But it is hard to evaluate whether they are missionaries or political pragmatists, interested in using a neighboring state to advance their own local interests.

The Lingering Role of Russia

By far the strongest and most pervasive outside force in Central Asia is that of Russia, which the world is inclined to forget is now foreign. The former Soviet Army, now the Russian Army, is still stationed in all of the republics, and important strategic facilities, such as the space complex at Baikonur, Kazakhstan, or airfields in Turkmenistan, remain under Russian control. Perhaps even more influential is the fact that all of Central Asia remains within the ruble zone, with none of the new nations making active moves toward an independent currency. Russia has made staying within the ruble zone a precondition for receiving a portion of the USSR's hard-currency reserves and property, which Russia seized unilaterally, but this has left all of the Central Asian nations captives to Russian fiscal policies. The effect has been almost catastrophic, as the countries have suffered Russia's inflation, exacerbating a cash shortage brought on

by Moscow's refusal to ship currency to the new nations; there has not, however, been a corresponding rise in the availability of goods, as there has been in Moscow.

Perhaps the greatest Russian influence, however, comes from the habits of the Central Asians themselves, especially the elites who rely upon and defer to Russian expertise. Long after the putative breakup of the USSR, Moscow-based teams of advisers were active in Kazakhstan and other republics, planning economic, legal, and other policies for the leadership. Central Asian governments are training their diplomats in Russia's diplomatic academy and are following Russia's lead in the international bodies to which the Central Asian nations have now been admitted as members.

The degree to which Russia still considers itself an "elder brother" to Central Asia may be seen in three unilateral policy stances which Russia has developed over summer and fall 1992: Russia has the right to interfere to defend the interests of Russians who live outside of Russia; Russia's legitimate security interests will be violated if any country leaves the CIS; and any changes in the CIS, or former Soviet, borders will be considered a violation of Russian security. As demonstrated by the current growing Russian (and much smaller Kazakhstani, Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani) presence in Tajikistan, these are not idle policies.

A far more important Russian influence is economic: defining the economic interests of the emerging nations. Russians have an interest in the preservation of economic unity within the former Soviet "economic space," which requires that the Central Asian nations continue to play the roles they played in the USSR, that of suppliers of raw materials and consumers of imported, low-quality Russian manufactured goods.

Real economic independence requires that the Central Asian nations develop manufacturing capacities of their own, but the deterioration of the economic situation faces each of the countries with drastic problems of time. Russia's policies, combined with the geographic isolation of Central Asia and the Central Asians' lack of access to capital for development, are creating huge tensions between the need for quick economic recovery and the possibilities each nation will enjoy for creating individual economic independence in the future. It may not be long before economic collapse will become such a threat to political stability that Central Asia will have no choice but to fall back into a Russian orbit, supplying raw materials at Moscow's behest.

The Futures

In evaluating the possible futures of Central Asia, it is important to remember that the primary issue remains the same fight that caused the breakup of the USSR in the first place: the struggle to dominate government-controlled wealth and resources. Ultimately economics will determine which of the possible scenarios actually comes about.

The first and most obvious of these is that the old elite will manage to remain in control, probably by playing off Russia against foreign interests, seeking the best possible deals from US, Turkish, Iranian, Saudi, and other investors in exploiting resources which Russia would otherwise take, and which Russia in part claims as successor to the USSR. Lucrative oil extraction and exploration deals in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are examples for this model of maintaining political stability, but at the same time they indicate the potential pitfalls as well.

The most immediate pitfall is that the slow "pay-back" time of such deals is asynchronous with a rapidly deteriorating economic situation; each of the rulers must address the question of whether economic recovery can come fast enough to salvage political support. This is in large part a question of linkages between the republic governments and the local authorities. Large-scale foreign economic investments require local support, which in turn requires a ceding of authority that central governments are reluctant to offer. This is especially true of the formal religious establishment in Uzbekistan, which may well demand increased local authority, thereby weakening Tashkent's ability to control execution of on-site projects.

A related and more immediate problem is that of cadre; much of the execution of development projects has been passed to the sons of the elite, the so-called "golden youth." This has been a group especially susceptible to corruption, which alienates local authorities without moving work ahead. The golden youth relies heavily on existing government structures, which are increasingly dysfunctional, and has ties as well to the shadow economy.

Since it requires some sharing of authority, Islam may be attempted as a stabilizing factor in at least Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The attempt to limit the expansion of Islam's role is a major cause of the disintegration of Tajikistan, and it could cripple Kyrgyzstan, because southern Kyrgyzstan has a large and compact Uzbek population that is influ-

enced by developments across the border in Uzbekistan.

The hope that prosperity will bring stability may not work in Kazakhstan, and in some ways may even exacerbate the problems, because of the republic's demographics. Industry is almost exclusively Russian-controlled, so a strong recovery in this sector would lead to the comparative impoverishment of the Kazakh population. Worse, empowering the Russian industrialists would be a *de facto* recognition of continuing Russian hegemony, something that not even the most Russified of the Kazakh elite wishes to accept.

A second possibility is that a new elite may manage to replace the old, but pursue essentially the same sort of development strategy as would the old elite, although perhaps under a different ideological cloak. An example is the "brotherhood" of Slavic and Turkic peoples proclaimed by Olzhas Suleimenov in his book *Az i ia* (Alma Ata, 1976; 1989), where he argues that medieval Turkic and Russian tribes were so intermingled and interwoven as to have shared a single culture, making their successors, the Russians and Central Asians of today, virtual brothers.

As an idea this is attractive, for it provides grounds on which citizenship in the new nations would not be ethnic, but in reality there are two serious problems to such an ideology. First, the Russians are highly unlikely to accept the claim, except perhaps as a facade for continued Russian hegemony. The Central Asian masses, on the other hand, are unlikely to accept Russian hegemony in any form, even if rejecting it is to their economic disadvantage.

An even greater drawback is that this model begs the question of religion, by declaring that the "Turkic-Slavic" state would be secular. It is not just rising religious influence which would cripple any such attempted state, because in fact "secularism" is a disguised form of Russian hegemony, to the detriment of non-Russian cultural values. Non-establishment elites in Central Asia understand this, and so would be unlikely to back any attempt to create a Pan-Turko-Slavic state. The conservative, traditional nature of the second economy elite means that their support is also unlikely. The military-industrial complex might well make a strategic decision to back such an initiative for just the reasons that these other two would not, that it preserves Russian control.

Either of these two possibilities at least obviates or reduces what will be an enormous problem to

any other possible futures, that of defending the new state against Russia. Assuming either that indigenous armies could be raised which would be strong enough to hold Russia off or, more likely, that Russia's internal problems would weaken her army until it was less of a threat, then it is conceivable that a third future might elaborate itself.

In this case the Central Asian nations would manage to make the transition to real and full independence without any major shifting of the elites. For this to occur would require the appearance both of a genuine functioning republican economy and the formation of broad-based political support at the grass-roots level. At present only Nursultan Nazarbaev, in Kazakhstan, and Askar Akaev, in Kyrgyzstan, even begin to approach the necessary sort of political support, and their support is fragile.

The necessary economic conditions and firmer popular support would require a fusion of the military-industrial elites with those of the second economy, aided and supported by the clerics of SADUM. The result would be an inevitable "greening" of the republics, making them more Muslim, which would in turn be likely to alarm Russia. Still, the possibility exists for this sort of long-term stability to emerge in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan; it would seem to be virtually impossible, however, in the case of Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan.

The existence of genuinely independent states in Central Asia would seem to depend upon a high degree of regional cooperation. While there are strong possibilities for eventual cooperation, at the same time boundary problems between and among the republics are likely to remain, because of the transnational nature of the local traditional elites. Moreover, these regional or separatist conflicts provide ripe soil for intervention by Russian "hegemonalists," who fan regional conflicts into disputes.

The vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union has opened the possibility for a fourth future, one in which the ideological and material "have-nots" of the old system combine to remove the pro-old-system "haves," and so create genuinely independent states controlled by new elites. Presumably these elites would be drawn from the new, nationalist elites and the local religious elites, with financial and organizational support by the local elites of the shadow economy. This support might include the co-optation of the military-industrial complex or, more likely, the reduction of the industrialists' influence, by making it impossible for in-

dustry to function. This would lead to the voluntary withdrawal of industry, presumably to Russia. The political and religious cast of such a successor state would obviously be Islamic, if not in formal ideology then at least in general world view, and it would be oriented toward the Muslim world.

Which of these futures emerges depends upon a complex of factors that for the moment are ill-defined. The Central Asian states are in the peculiar condition of now possessing an independence for which the masses had not yet begun to press and which the elites, for the most part, did not want. The fact that regional unity has not yet emerged does not mean that it could not appear over the next decade, as the masses begin to savor the dual possibilities of gaining their own sovereignty and throwing off Russian hegemony.

Turkey does not seem as likely to dominate the region as people assumed immediately after the USSR's collapse. What seems more likely to emerge is an orientation towards Asian or Islamic states. In fact, the scenarios which seem the most likely to lead to eventual stability in the Central Asian region are ones in which new, indigenous elites come to power, replacing the European-oriented economies with ones more Asian or Islamic in character. Such economic models have the benefit of not raising

local expectations for standards of living which can not realistically be met.

However, the appearance of an "Asian-Muslim" region immediately on its borders would create an immediate problem for Russia, which has an inner flank of its own Muslims, stretching from Chechnia to Tataria. Russia, therefore, will work hard through both formal and informal means to reduce the likelihood that this option will develop.

The pace of Russia's own recovery will determine how effectively Russia will be able to influence events in Central Asia to Russian advantage. Only if Russia recovers slowly will Central Asia go its own way. Thus, even today, as it has been for the past nearly 200 years, the shape of Central Asia's political future still depends on the way that the political chips fall in Russia.

*Martha Brill Olcott is Professor of Political Science at Colgate University and Resident Scholar at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). Her many publications include *The Kazakhs* (Hoover Institution Press, 1987) and *The Soviet Multinational State. Readings and Documents* (M. E. Sharpe, 1990).*

The Harriman Institute Forum is published monthly by
The Harriman Institute, Columbia University.

Editor: Ronald Meyer

Copyright © 1992 by the Trustees of Columbia University
in the City of New York.

All Rights Reserved.

Reproduction of any kind without written permission
is strictly forbidden.

ISSN Number: 0896-114X

Subscription Information: US/Canada: 1 yr. \$30; 2 yrs. \$50.

Elsewhere: 1 yr. \$40; 2 yrs. \$75.

Selected back issues available at \$3 each.

Make check or money order payable to Columbia University
and send to *Forum*, Harriman Institute, Columbia University
420 West 118 Street, New York, New York 10027

Columbia University
Harriman Institute
420 W. 118th Street
New York, NY 10027

Non Profit Org.
US Postage
PAID
New York, NY
Permit #3593